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SUBJECT: KUWAIT AND NATO CONDUCT FIRST GULF JOINT EXERCISE

Classified By: Political Counselor Pete O'Donohue for reasons 1.4 b and d

Summary

¶1. (S) Kuwaiti National Security Bureau (NSB) and military services successfully concluded six days of training that culminated in an exercise involving boarding, air defense, and gunnery drills on November 09 with NATO's Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2). In 2004, Kuwait became the first Gulf state to join NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, and this week's exercise signifies the first NATO-led training in the Gulf. NSB Deputy Director Shaykh Thamer told the press that the drill's focus was on combating terrorism and piracy; Kuwaiti Chief of Naval Operations Major General Ahmed Al-Mulla suggested such engagement increases Iran's sense of isolation in the region. End summary.

NATO Exercise in Kuwait

¶2. (U) Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2), in an exercise designed to promote practical military cooperation with Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) members, concluded six days of military training culminating in a joint exercise in Kuwait on November 09. The exercise involved three primary events:

-- Boarding exercise. Kuwaiti Marines practiced boarding the NATO Flagship FGS Karlsruhe.

-- Air defense exercise. Four Kuwaiti F-18s successfully engaged the NATO flotilla as part of an air defense exercise.

-- Gunnery exercise. Kuwaiti Navy and SNMG2 ships engaged a dummy target from a distance of about 3 kilometers

Flotilla Components

¶3. (U) The flotilla, which conducted the exercise at a site in Kuwaiti territorial waters near the Saudi border, consisted of the German frigate FGS Karlsruhe, FGS Rohn (German oiler), USS The Sullivans (destroyer), and Kuwaiti Navy Patrol Boats Al-Istiqlal and Al-Saad, as well as the Kuwaiti support ship, Al-Dora. Other Kuwaiti participation included six military speedboats and four F-18s.

National Security Bureau at the NATO Helm

¶4. (U) Kuwaiti National Security Bureau (NSB) Deputy Director Shaykh Thamer Ali Al Sabah (nephew of the Foreign Minister) orchestrated the event on behalf of Kuwait. Shaykh Thamer lauded to Kuwaiti press and Embassy DATT the success of the exercise as an "important event" for Kuwait and hoped for future engagement on an annual basis. He extolled the

importance of the exercise in upgrading the level of tactics, combat and defensive efficiency of the Kuwaiti Navy and Air Force personnel, commending their high-quality military skills and viewed the drill as a "completion of solid cooperation between Kuwait and NATO." He also expressed his desire for increased opportunities for NATO-sponsored training and for Kuwaiti military officers to be stationed in NATO organizations and vessels. (Note: Kuwait, in November 2004, became the first Gulf country to join the ICI and in December 2006, the GOK signed a security agreement on information exchange with NATO during an international conference on GCC-NATO cooperation in Kuwait. End note).

¶15. (S) Intentionally steering clear of Iran-directed discussions, Shaykh Thamer insisted that by participating in this exercise, the GOK was not seeking to "instigate quarrels or destabilize the region." Instead, he highlighted the importance of the drill to Kuwait in combating piracy or "major threats of terrorist groups, Al-Qaeda in particular." In a sidebar with Embassy DATT, however, Kuwaiti Chief of Naval Operations Major General Ahmed Al-Mullah expressed the hope that enhanced relations with NATO in the future would provide additional flexibility in dealing with Iran. Al-Mullah, pleased that Kuwait was the first ICI member to participate in such an exercise, said that Kuwait desires a NATO presence in the region; such engagement, supported by Kuwait, increases Iran's sense of isolation while offering non-military opportunities for constructive engagement with Iran, i.e. search and rescue training.

Comment

KUWAIT 00001135 002 OF 002

¶16. (S) This exercise was a bold move for a GOK usually prone to limit regional engagement to interaction under the umbrellas of the UN or GCC. It also demonstrates muscle flexing by NSB -- an ill-defined entity (or "think tank" -- as defined by Shaykh Thamer) headed by ruling family insider Shaykh Ahmed Al Fahad Al Sabah. Shaykh Ahmed, though titular head of the NSB, allows Shaykh Thamer free rein in managing the Bureau's daily affairs as well as special projects, such as NATO, Vital Infrastructure Protection, and Gulf Security Dialogue. Strategically, by partnering closely with NATO -- independently of the United States --, Kuwait raised its profile among its neighbors and leveraged a measured amount of pressure via NATO against Iran. The next step, though, remains to be seen. End comment.

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